

Mountain Laurel

(*Kalmia latifolia* L.)

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Alabama's abundant forests are filled with many beautiful flowering plants, shrubs and trees, but few have the grace and beauty of our native mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia* L.). Also called Calico Bush or Spoonwood, the mountain laurel not only paints a striking and delicate spring picture with its large pink or white flower clusters, but as an evergreen it also adds color and contrast to the barren backdrop of winter.

Mountain laurel is a many-stemmed evergreen that normally grows as a thicket-forming shrub but occasionally reaches heights of 30 feet. It has a short crooked trunk as a shrub, around 6 inches in diameter, but grows up to 15 inches as a tree. Its stout spreading helps to form a compact rounded crown.

The leaves are elliptic, pointed, thick, and leathery. They have a lustrous dark brown color above with a paler green below and they droop. Bark is thin, dark reddish brown and divides into long, narrow scales.



lands upon it, the anther springs up, releasing the webby-threaded pollen which clings to the insect. The buds are pure pink, cone-shaped, and corrugated.

The capsule is dull red, five-lobed, and about 1/4 inch in diameter.

Mountain laurel grows best in dry or moist acid soils in understory of mixed forests on upland mountain slopes and in valleys. It also grows in shrub thickets called "heath balds" or "laurel slicks." Its range is from Southeast Maine to North Florida, west to Louisiana and north to Indiana. In the south it will grow in elevations to 4,000 feet.

Historically, the wood was used for tool handles and turnery. The burls (hard knot-like growths on the trunk) were used for briar tobacco pipes. Today it is used as an ornamental.

The leaves of the mountain laurel contain amounts of andromedotoxin, a substance particularly poisonous to sheep. Cattle, horses, and goats are also susceptible. Deer and other wild animals have been known to browse on the foliage without being seriously affected. Honey from the flowers is believed to be poisonous. ☞

The flowers are waxy pinkish or white, cupped up, five-lobed, and one inch broad in terminal clusters. The mountain laurel is especially adapted for insect pollination by the stamens being fastened to the petals so that as an insect

Photos by Coleen Vansant



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